Goodness (The Good, Agathon)

Ferber, Rafael

Abstract: This is a short overview of Plato's "greatest thing to be learned" or the "greatest lesson" (megiston mathêma) – the Idea of the Good.

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denied that one could have many close friends (*Nicomachean Ethics* 9.10). But unlike Aristotle, Plato did not investigate such friendship systematically, though he no doubt appreciated it: Socrates much admires, for example, the bond between Lysis and his agemate Menexenus. When he visits Socrates in jail, Crito affirms that he will never again find such a companion (*Crito* 44B), and tries to convince Socrates to let him bribe the jailer, since it is shameful to value money more than friends. But for Socrates evading the law is wrong, and so he refuses the aid proffered by his friends. So too, Phaedo assures Echecrates that Socrates died in the presence of many friends (*Phd*. 58C), but he is amazed that Socrates conversed with them unsentimentally, as on any other day (58E–59A). Though Socrates may have described himself, tongue in cheek, as an expert in *ta erôtika*, when it came to *philia* what most interested him, and Plato, was the love of wisdom or *philosophia*.

GOODNESS (THE GOOD, *AGATHON*)

Rafael Ferber

The good is for the Platonic Socrates that for which everything is done (cf. *Gorgias* 468b). This is an 'axiom' to which Plato seems to adhere during his whole writing career (cf. *Symposium* 205e–206a, *Republic* 505d–e, *Philebus*. 65a). But the Socratic good becomes for Plato in the *R*. the idea of the good, which is also the 'greatest thing to be learned' and the 'greatest lesson' (*megiston mathêma*, *R*. 505a, 519c).

We may find a first allusion to this idea in the *Lysis* in 'what we like in the first place' (*prôton philon*, *Ly*. 219d), cf. Penner and Rowe (2005:278–9). The *Politicus* may touch on this idea under the title of the 'exact itself' (284d; cf. Ferber 2002:190). But the idea of the good is treated explicitly only in the sixth and seventh book of the *R*. in the course of three similes, though caution is warranted: the Platonic Socrates gives in these similes only his 'opinions without science' (*R*. 506c) and even these opinions are incomplete (506e1–3). First, he distances himself from existing philosophical conceptions of the good, where the good consists in pleasure or in knowledge (cf. 505b–c). Both conceptions are refuted, one because there are also bad pleasures (cf. *Grg*.499c6–7), the other because this conception would be circular (cf. *Euthyphro* 292e3): knowledge would be knowledge of something, namely, the good. Second, the Platonic Socrates says positively three things about the good: (a) it is not sought like 'just and beautiful things' (505d), where we may be satisfied also with the appearance, but as something which really is good. So we may be conventionalists concerning the 'just and beautiful things', but we are realists concerning the good. We want not the apparent, but the real good. (b) It is the final cause of all that is good in desire and action (517b7–c4). (c) The knowledge of the idea of the good is the condition of the knowledge of just and the beautiful things, that is, the ideas of justice and beauty (506a). This means that if the ideas of justice and beauty were not also good, they would not be ideas of real but only of apparent justice and beauty. Since without knowledge of the idea of the good no other knowledge is of any use to us (cf. 505a2–3), knowledge of apparent justice and apparent beauty would not be of any use to us. Therefore knowledge of the idea of the good is required to know the goodness and usefulness of just and beautiful things.

These two negative and three positive (formal) determinations are supplemented by the

substantive description which the Platonic Socrates gives in the three similes. Common to them is that the idea of the good figures as cause (q.v.; *aitia*, 508e3.517b2) or principle (*archê*, 510b7). In the simile of the sun (q.v.), it functions as the cause of knowledge, truth and being, although it is itself not being (*ouk ousias ontos tou agathou*, 509b8–9), but 'surpasses the being in dignity and power' (*epekeina tês ousias presbeia kai dynamei hyperechontos*, 505b9–10). Thus Plato seems to found his ontology and epistemology on a supreme principle which – if the cause is not the same as that which is caused – must be 'something else and more beautiful than knowledge and truth' (508e5–6) and being (but cf. Baltes 1997; Ferber 2005; Seel 2007). We can see in this description of the good the inauguration of the problem of the third between and above being and thinking: As light and its master, the sun, functions as a third item (*R.* 507d.e), so the idea of the good functions as a third item between and above thinking and being. In the simile of the line (q.v.), the idea of the good, though not mentioned there, functions as an unhypothetical principle (*anhypothetos archê*) of the mathematical 'presuppositions' (*hypotheseis*, 510c6), that is, the four arts of the *quadrivium* (on the text of the simile cf. Lafrance 1994; on interpretations between 1804 and 1984, Lafrance 1987).

The image of the cave (q.v.) shows us what education means for Plato. It is 'a leading of the soul' (*psychês periagogê*, 521c1) that is also a return of the soul's attention to the really good. But the idea of the good functions also as a principle of Plato's politics so that not only every soul in her private life, but 'anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it' (510c). Because the philosopher-kings and -queens know the really good, they will also, in the sense of the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge, realize the good in the city (on all three similes cf. Ferber 1984:49–166, 1989:49–219; Schindler 2008:139–75).

The *Phlb.* starts with the search for a certain state of the soul which can render the life of all human beings happy (cf. *Phlb.* 11d4–6). But it asks nevertheless the Socratic question '. . . what in fact is the good . . .' (13e5–6) and holds on to a 'single form' (*mia idea*) of the good (65a1), which Socrates tries to hold down with the conjunction of three qualities (*poia*): 'beauty, symmetry and truth' (65a2; cf. Ferber 2010). In his old age, Plato seems to have held a public 'lecture on the good', although this lecture may go back to earlier 'seminars' or '*synousiai*' 'on the good'. (cf. Simplicius, *in Aristotelis Physica commentaria Phlb.* 542.1012, 545.24). After an anecdote reported by Aristoxenos about Aristotle, the hearers of the lecture expected to be told

> . . . something about one of the recognized human goods, such as wealth, health or strength, or, in sum, some marvelous happiness. But when it appeared that Plato was to talk *on mathematics and numbers and geometry and astronomy*, leading up to the statement that there the good is one (*hoti tagaton estin hen*), they were overwhelmed by the paradox of the whole matter. Some then thought little of the thing and others even reproved it. (Aristoxenus, *The Elements of Harmony* II)

In this lecture, Plato may have presented the idea on the good in a dialectical way, where unity as we find it in the abstract structures of mathematics may have played a significant role (cf. Burnyeat 2000). From this lecture, only fragments from notes taken by his hearers, especially from Aristotle, survive

(cf. the collection of fragments in Gaiser 1963:441–557; Isnardi-Parente 1997:406–84, 1998:5–115; Krämer 1990:203–17). But we find in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* a 'short and principal' summary (987a27, 988a17) of the public lecture whose content Plato may have already communicated earlier to his advanced students (cf. Ferber 1989:211–16).

HAPPINESS (*EUDAIMONIA*)

Rachana Kamtekar

In contemporary usage, 'happiness' is sometimes taken to be a feeling, as temporary or permanent as feelings are. In ancient Greek usage, in contrast, *eudaimonia*, the term translated 'happiness', characterizes a whole life and not just a moment of feeling, and has an objective dimension: the happy life not only feels good to the one who lives it, but is good. Sometimes translators use 'flourishing' instead; one ground for this is that not only humans, but other species as well, are said to flourish when they are in a good condition relative to their capacities, but it was for the ancients a philosophical issue whether *eudaimonia* ought to be conceived this way, and indeed whether a life of pleasure not only feels good to the one who lives it but also is the best life; the same philosophical issue arises today about happiness, and it cannot be settled by a translation (see Kraut 1979).

Plato takes it as uncontroversial that all of us wish to be happy, that is, to live well (*Euthydemus* 278e; *Meno* 78a–b; *Symposium* 205a). He does not mean by this that we wish that our desires, whatever they are, be satisfied; rather, happiness requires possessing, and correctly using, genuinely good things (*Euthd.* 280d). But happiness is not divorced from desire-satisfaction either, for we all do in fact desire the genuinely good things obtaining which will make us happy (*Gorgias* 468b; *Men.* 77b–78b; *Republic* 505d–e); evidence of this includes our pursuit of what appears good, our loss of desire for things once we learn they are not good, and our efforts to determine what really is good.

What are the genuinely good things the possession and correct use of which make us happy? In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that the good or happy human life contains a mixture of knowledge and pleasure (*Phlb.* 20d–22a). In the *Grg.* (470e) and *R.* bk 1 (354a), Socrates says that our happiness depends entirely on whether or not we are virtuous, but at other times he makes the weaker claim that having virtue makes one happier than any of those who lack virtue, no matter what else they have and one lacks (*R.* 360e–62c, 387d, 392cd, 580b). The comparative claim allows nonmoral goods, such as health and wealth, to contribute to the virtuous person's happiness. (The case that the *R.* makes only this 'comparative' claim about happiness' relationship to virtue is made in Irwin 1995:191–3 and contested in Annas 1999:84–7; the alternatives for relating happiness and virtue are canvassed in Vlastos 1999.) To explain *how* virtue contributes to happiness, the *R.* (443d–444e) describes justice as a harmonious condition of soul, analogous to health for the body and wisdom as the perfection of our best capacity, reason, in knowledge of the forms and especially of the form of the good (*R.* 518c–d, 504e–5a). In both cases, the happiness described involves both the satisfaction of desires and the possession of some genuinely good thing(s).

On the grounds that happiness consists in contemplation of the forms, an activity which is interrupted by our bodily condition, Plato sometimes (e.g. *Phaedo, Phaedrus*) seems to